

Clay Geerdes

When I started **Comix World** in October of 1973, it was not the focal point of my life, just one of many writing projects with which I was involved. I wrote regularly for the Los Angeles **FREE PRESS**, Berkeley **BARB**, **ADAM**, **COAST**, and countless other magazines. I lived in Berkeley up near Indian Rock Park, but I spent most of my time on the streets of Berkeley and San Francisco. I had to farm a lot of material for my regular entertainment columns and had no time to focus on any one thing in depth. Freelancing was not like teaching. I didn't have time for research and it was of little interest to my editors.

1973 was a time of sex, drugs, and rock and roll music. Sounds like a deadly cliché in 1995, the year of sex, drugs, mutilation, and MTV, but I have to be honest about it all, otherwise, why write a memoir? The creative people I met on my rounds had come to the Bay Area to drop acid, play music, and chase one another from crash pad to Fillmore to Hippy Hill in search of the perfect acid orgasm. Most were young, very young. For every person my age, 39, there must have been several thousand runaway teenagers.

Nobody came to the Bay Area to draw underground comix for a living. Forget that. Nobody I know ever made a *living* out of drawing them. The comix were on a roll in the early seventies, because there were several companies committed to getting them out regularly, but I wouldn't call it the best of times. Most people still think of the underground comix as sixties, but there were only a handful around then; underground comix expanded into an industry in the seventies. When I first moved to Haight-Ashbury in 1965, the only comix I saw in the Psychedelic Shop were those drawn by Joel Beck. Robert Crumb and Don Donahue didn't publish the first **ZAP** in comic format until February of 1968, though Crumb's style was already making people laugh via reprints of his *Head Comix* in underground papers like **YARROWSTALKS** and **THE EAST VILLAGE OTHER [EVO]**.

I became involved with the whole comix trip by accident. Arlene Elster advertised an Erotic Film Festival in the Berkeley **BARB** for the Fall of 1970 and I read the ad and was assigned to do a story on the event for **ADAM**. Arlene and a partner were running the Sutter Cinema on Sutter Street in San Francisco, so I went over to talk to her and get some background. Sitting in the lobby was Roger Brand. Roger had the latest ad he had drawn for the theater, a comic strip called the *SUTTER FOLLIES*. He was friendly and we talked and when Arlene came in we all went through a secret passage into a basement room beneath the building where we sat and smoked a joint and talked about the erotic film business. The Sutter Cinema was located in the building that had once been home to Charlie Low's **FORBIDDEN CITY**, a clandestine night club, and the room where we were toking had been an opium den in those bygone days.

After we left the theater, I gave Roger a lift back to his place out in Point Richmond and he gave me a concise lecture on the history of

underground comix and their relationship to things like the earlier Entertaining Comics [ECs], The Comics Code of 1954, and McCarthyism. Brand was the ultimate comic historian. He had all the early books on the subject and had read them all carefully. Harvey Kurtzman, the creator of **MAD** [1952], was his guru and he spoke of him with adoration and respect. In New York, Roger had inked for Wally Wood for awhile, then become involved with his own underground strip, **STRAWBRICK**, for **EVO**. He was the first person I had met who took the field of comic art seriously. The fact that he considered it worthy of critical study and evaluation influenced me to do a series of reports on the subject for the Los Angeles *Free Press* [**FREEP**]. It was Roger who passed me along from cartoonist to cartoonist and without his friendship and encouragement I doubt that I would have continued to write about the field.

I liked most of the comix. Not all of them. There were many I thought worthless and some I just didn't care about because they did not speak to me. Comics are a personal thing and one's degree of involvement is intricately related to the extent to which one sees his own fears and fantasies reflected in those little mirrors we call panels. Once I became involved with the underground comix scene, the cartoonists and publishers expected me to review all the books [favorably, of course] and write continual hype for the product. My early columns and newsletters reflect this biased attitude. While I avoided personal gossip, I was still thought of as a gossip by many. Some thought I was exploiting them! What a joke that was. I got little or nothing for all that purple prose. They had the product to sell, not me. They needed attention, not me. I could have filled my space in **FREEP** or **BARB** with rap about hippies milling in on streetcorners or having smoke-ins on the steps of college administration buildings. I felt I was doing cartoonists a favor when I promoted their stuff in my columns. I wanted them to sell some books and make some money.

I learned a lot during those days. Not only about comix, cartooning, and publishing. I learned how people come together in a scene and how they relate to one another. Later, when I was doing my newsletter, I got a lot of mail from people outside the Bay Area, guys who wanted to know how to get published in underground comix. They assumed it was an open door, but it never was. Very few outsiders got published.

This is how an underground comic came together. An artist got an idea. He worked it out, then asked various friends to contribute. Usually, he did the cover and one of the stories, then asked others for the rest. Since undergrounds averaged 32 pages and a cover, the internal art was divided into a number of stories two to ten pages in length. Once the first issue was together, it was assumed that the second issue would include the same people so the door was closed. People tended to stay together. Roger Brand had known Kim Deitch in New York and they continued to work together when both moved to the Bay Area. Bill Griffith knew Roger from **EVO**, so Roger was asked to contribute to **YOUNG LUST**. After getting out a few issues of **ZAP**, Crumb met S. Clay Wilson, Rick Griffin, Victor Moscoso, Spain, Gilbert